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ABSTRACT

This report presents selected interim results from a study designed to assess the quality of higher education through a survey of employer satisfaction with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the university graduates they employ. A 62-item survey questionnaire was developed and sent to employers in the West Midlands region of England. The survey found that the main areas of satisfaction with graduates were their willingness to learn, their co-operation, motivation, commitment, drive and energy, desire to achieve, and dependability. Employers were dissatisfied, however, with graduates' prior knowledge of the job, relevant work experience, knowledge of the organization, commercial awareness, experience of the world of work, and financial knowledge. Overall, it would seem that line managers and people in commerce and industry who work closely with recent graduates are satisfied but not enthusiastic about most of the graduates they employ. An appendix contains a rank-ordered listing of the satisfaction scores. (MDM)

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QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION PROJECT

EMPLOYER SATISFACTION

by

Lee Harvey

Interim report presented at the Society for Research in Higher Education Conference, Brighton, 14 December 1993.

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Employer Satisfaction

QHE

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The three year *QHE* project was launched in September 1991. It is sponsored by a partnership of education, government and business. There are currently 28 sponsors in the United Kingdom including the Department for Education, the funding councils, accrediting bodies, major employers, employers' organisations, higher education institutions, research and training organisations. It is independent of any single organisation or institution but its physical base is The University of Central England in Birmingham.

Each of the sponsors is represented on the project steering group which meets about once every three months. Sponsors are expected to take an active part in determining the scope and development of the project.

Dr Lee Harvey is the Senior Research Fellow and the project manager is Professor Diana Green, Pro-Vice Chancellor of The University of Central England.

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Employer Satisfaction: Interim Report.
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Employer Satisfaction

Introduction

In this session I would like to briefly present some interim results of ongoing research on employer satisfaction. There will be no attempt to make definitive claims about employer views. The aim is to outline some broad indications of employer satisfaction and encourage a debate about the implications for higher education.

The *QHE* Project has undertaken a wide range of enquiries into perceptions of quality in higher education. The project, based at the University of Central England in Birmingham, is funded by a consortium of education, government and industry. An underlying aim of the project is to inform policy. The first stage of the research focused on the identification of the criteria that different stakeholder groups regard as important in assessing quality in higher education.

As part of that process we have looked in some detail at employer perceptions. During 1992 we undertook some qualitative and quantitative research to establish the criteria by which employers think higher education should be assessed.[1] Through that research we began to get a feel for the kind of graduates employers wanted from higher education.

To take this further we devised an employer satisfaction survey. That is, we asked employers how satisfied they are with the graduates they employ in terms of a range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that graduates might be expected to exhibit.

Most research in this area, including our earlier research, focuses on the opinions of graduate recruiters, personnel officers and so on. We attempted, instead, to obtain the views of line-managers and people who work closely with graduates within organisations.

Methodology

It is notoriously difficult to obtain employer views of higher education. We wanted to assess employer satisfaction with a range of graduate attributes. We used a five point rating scale for each of the 62 attributes, subdivided into 5 groupings:

- knowledge
- general transferable skills
- self-skills
- attitudes
- prior experience of the work situation.

To obtain considered ratings for each item, it was necessary to design a self-completion questionnaire rather than to employ face-to-face interviewing. Furthermore, time and resources precluded large numbers of face-to-face interviews.

Previous experience had suggested that obtaining employer views is unlikely to be successful unless you identify potential respondents within organisations. when using a mailed questionnaire, there are a number of potential addressees:

1 the organisation – 'to whom it may concern';
2 a specified job description – 'the works manager' or 'the personnel officer';
3 chief executive (for downward transmission);
4 a particular individual (whose name you have obtained from somewhere);
5 a particular individual suggested to you by an intermediary to whom you can refer in the covering letter;

6 a particular individual you know (or with whom you have established contact through a pre-contact technique).

At the pilot stage, we used a mixture of options 3, 4, 5 and 6. We ruled out the first two as ineffective on the basis of previous research. However, we increasingly came to the view that the most fruitful approach was to pre-contact an appropriate person within an organisation. The contacted individual would either be asked to:

- complete the questionnaire (if appropriate)
- take responsibility to find, and ensure a return from, a suitable respondent within the firm
- co-ordinate the distribution and return to a small group of suitable respondents if the organisation was sufficiently large or diverse to warrant multiple responses.

Approaches, other than the pre-contacts, were astoundingly unsuccessful. For example, at the pilot stage we undertook direct mailing of the questionnaire to chief executives of all 162 firms affiliated to the West Midlands CBI making it clear that the CBI supported the research and had suggested the contact. However, there was no way of knowing, from the information provided, the size the the organisations and whether they recruited graduates.

As a control a further 27 respondents, in the West Midlands, already on the *QHE* mailing list were also circulated with the questionnaire.

The replies were as follows:

From the CBI mailing to 162 named contacts (mainly chief executives) we received:

2 replies with completed questionnaire
2 replies without questionnaire indicating that they did not recruit graduates.
4 letters returned by the post office marked 'gone away'.
154 non responses.

A usable response rate of 1.3%

From the control mailing of 27 West Midlands contacts:

7 separate replies with completed questionnaire
1 reply containing 6 completed questionnaires.

A 30% response rate (excluding the bonus of multiple replies).

Three things that might have increased response have to be taken into account:
1. there was no follow-up of non-respondents as this was at the pilot stage
2. no post-paid reply label was included in the original mailing
3. the pilot questionnaire was somewhat more complex than the final version.

However, the pilot clearly indicated that mailing questionnaires to employers without any prior contact is an inappropriate technique as it secures very few responses for the time and energy invested.

For the main research we thus used pre-contacts. Making these kind of contacts, however, takes a lot of work and is a very time-consuming and slow process.

It is also important to bear in mind that the sample, built up in this way, has a number of characteristics:

- it is not random (but a randomly generated sample with a response rate of 5% isn't either!);
- it snowballs within organisations where a co-ordinator is used;
- it tends to be informed – pre-contacted respondents tend to be knowledgeable and interested.

The point of the research, though, is not to provide generalisable statistical results from random samples but to provide initial indicators of employer satisfaction and to suggest a suitable methodology for use by institutions (or faculties) to systematically assess the satisfaction of employers of their graduates.

In addition to the quantitative research we are also undertaking qualitative research through the use of group discussions, in-depth interviews, analysis of responses to open questions and comments made through correspondence. This presentation of results will, however, concentrate mainly, on the results of the quantitative research.

Expectations

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) noted, in 1987, that

> employers will increasingly expect higher education to give a grounding in personal skills: communication, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership.

The assumption was that higher education put too much emphasis on subject content and did not adequately equip graduates to work in modern organisations. It was implicitly accepted that graduates had a sound knowledge base in their subject, and it was perhaps the transferable skills that needed addressing directly. Higher education institutions tended not to take too seriously the need to directly address the communication skills of their graduates, after all, much of higher education was about students communicating their work through essays or laboratory reports.

Satisfaction ratings

These results are interim results based on the first 76 respondents (up to 30 November 1993). The results should not be taken out of context .The research is ongoing and a full report will be made available early next year.

To make the data easier to understand, the five point satisfaction scale for each item was converted into a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 representing very dissatisfied, 100 very satisfied and 50 a neutral midpoint between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Overall, the average score for the vast majority of items was over 50. Only three items showed an average that fell into the dissatisfaction area under 50. However, 48 items had averages within the range 50 to 70 which does not suggests that employers were overwhelmingly satisfied.

Areas of greatest satisfaction

The results for the 62 different items are shown in the Appendix. The main areas of satisfaction with graduates were their willingness to learn, their co-operation, motivation, commitment, drive and energy, desire to achieve and dependability. It may come as a surprise to some teachers that they are producing such highly motivated and committed graduates.

Employers show a high degree of satisfaction with graduates' information technology skills (which is probably not a surprise) and with the teamworking ability of recent graduates (which possibly is surprising).

Employers are also satisfied with the flexibility and adaptability of graduates.

Areas of least satisfaction

At the other end, employers were dissatisfied with graduates' prior knowledge of the job, and relevant work experience, knowledge of the organisation, commercial awareness, experience of the world of work and financial knowledge.

Graduates do not appear to have particularly good negotiating skills and employers are relatively dissatisfied with their leadership and problem-setting ability, decision-making and influencing skills.

Knowledge and understanding
Perhaps rather more surprising is the relative dissatisfaction with the specialist factual knowledge, deep understanding and ability to summarise key issues. Understanding of core principles fared better with a score of 67 (ranked in 21st place).

To assess whether satisfaction with specialist knowledge and understanding differed depending on the nature of the post, respondents were asked to indicate if the post filled by the graduate required specialist factual knowledge.

Those who indicated that specialist knowledge was needed gave a higher, but not statistically different, satisfaction rating (ranked 46th) to graduates' specialist knowledge than the group for whom specialist knowledge was not needed (ranked 57th). Even so, for the group where specialist knowledge is needed, a satisfaction score of 59 is not encouraging (see Appendix).

Rather more encouraging was the higher satisfaction rating given to 'understanding core principles' by the group for whom specialist knowledge was a necessity (mean = 69, rank 12th).

Conversely, the group for whom specialist knowledge was not needed were more satisfied with graduates' deep understanding, general knowledge and knowledge of social and political issues.

Communication skills
The interim results of the *QHE* research on employer satisfaction indicate considerable dissatisfaction with the communication skills of graduates. Written and oral communication skills, with a satisfaction ranking of 46th and 32nd respectively are rather worrying.

The qualitative research suggests that graduates are not good at communicating with a variety of audiences. They can write essays and laboratory reports but rarely seem able to present complex ideas in jargon-free language.

Employers say that poor communications skills are evident at all stages of the recruitment process and beyond. Graduates often do not express themselves well on application forms. They are often incapable of writing concisely and identifying their strengths *vis à vis* the post. There are classic examples, such as the science graduate who waffled on for pages and waxed lyrical about interests in all matters literary in his application for a job as a journalist.

Occasionally employers do come across applications from graduates that contain a large number of spelling, grammatical and typing errors and are poorly laid-out, and this is rather worrying. [2]

Oral presentations in assessment centres are frequently dismal. Employers have noted that graduates are often more comfortable communicating with computers than with

people and this is reflected in the relatively high satisfaction rating given to graduates ability to use information technology (8th).

Graduates, once in the job often show a startling inability to write reports, minutes of meetings, or even business letters. Yet, good communication skills are very important and possessing good communication skills is often seen by employers as an indicator of potential success.

Employers have suggested that, amongst other things, higher education study programmes might incorporate the following to improve communication skills:

- give students experience of writing for different kinds of audiences (other than the lecturers who teach on programmes of study);
- give student the opportunity to write different kinds of document (other than standard essays and laboratory reports);
- provide more opportunities for students to undertake oral presentations (preferably to mixed audiences);
- provide communication skills training for students as an *integral* part of course units;
- provide staff development for teachers that enables them to coach students in a variety of communication skills.

However, employers are not blaming higher education entirely for the relatively poor communication skills of graduates, school and further education must also share the responsibility, as must the government for reducing, far too drastically, the unit of resource in higher education.

Conclusion

Overall, it would seem that line-managers and people in commerce and industry who work closely with recent graduates are satisfied with graduate abilities without being enthusiastic.

Reasonable expectations of high levels of satisfaction in such areas as specialist subject knowledge and communication skills are not fulfilled. On the contrary, they score rather disappointingly on the satisfaction scale.

On the other hand, the teamworking, willingness to learn, flexibility, adaptability and personal attributes such as enthusiasm and determination are quite satisfactory. So too are graduates information technology skills.

By no means all of the qualities, identified by CIHE six years ago, are being developed by higher education to the satisfaction of employers. It seems that institutions are doing relatively well in developing teamworking and personal skills but rather poorly in relation to communication, problem-solving and leadership.

However, one nagging doubt about all this remains. Is the satisfaction that employers express with teamworking, flexibility, willingness to learn, and so on, a satisfaction with the output of higher education or a satisfaction with their own recruitment processes?

ENDNOTES

1 See Harvey, L., ed., 1993, *Quality Assessment in Higher Education: Collected Papers of the* QHE *Project. Birmingham, QHE.*

2 The job-seeking skills training on *The Living Soap*, provided a graphic illustration. The trainer told the best intervieweee that he would not have been interviewed in real life because his curriculum vitae and application form were the worst he had ever seen.

APPENDIX: SATISFACTION SCORES AND RANKS inc SFK SUBGROUPS

Attribute	*Total Sample*	*Total Sample Rank*	*SFK YES*	*SFK NO*	*SFK YES Rank*	*SFK NO Rank*
Willingness to learn	81.60	1	76.72	84.88	2	1
Co-operation	78.12	2	77.50	78.57	3	2
Desire to achieve/motivation	77.63	3	78.91	76.70	1	3
Commitment	75.66	4	74.22	76.70	4	3
Self-motivation	74.65	5	75.00	74.40	5	4
Drive/energy	74.01	6	74.22	73.86	6	6
Dependability/reliability	73.36	7	72.66	73.86	8	6
Ability to use information technology	73.26	8	73.33	73.21	7	9
Team work	72.92	9	72.50	73.21	9	9
Flexibility	71.38	10	68.75	73.30	12	8
Equipped for continuous education	70.71	11	67.59	72.67	16	11
Self-confidence	69.79	12	69.17	70.24	10	14
Adaptability (intellectual)	69.74	13	66.41	72.16	19	12
Adaptability (organisational)	69.41	14	68.75	69.89	12	15
Enquiry and research skills	69.01	15	68.97	69.05	11	16
Numeracy	68.40	16	67.50	69.05	17	17
Persistence/tenacity	68.09	17	67.97	68.18	15	20
Self-management	67.36	18	66.67	67.86	18	21
Analytic ability	67.01	19	65.00	68.45	23	19
Rapid conceptualisation of issues	66.67	20	63.71	68.75	28	18
Understanding of core principles	66.67	21	68.75	65.12	12	28
Interest in life-long learning	66.55	22	66.07	66.86	20	23
Consideration for others	66.32	23	65.83	66.67	21	24
Logical argument	66.12	24	60.16	70.45	36	13
Loyalty	66.12	25	64.06	67.61	26	22
Initiative	64.93	26	64.17	65.48	25	25
Technical ability	64.67	27	64.84	64.53	24	29
Can deal with large amounts of info.	64.33	28	65.32	63.64	22	31
Problem solving ability	64.24	29	62.50	65.48	32	25
Maturity	64.14	30	64.06	64.20	26	30
Can cope with pressure/stress	63.49	31	63.28	63.64	29	31
Communication skills (oral)	62.85	32	62.50	63.10	30	34
Curiosity	62.50	33	63.28	61.93	31	35
General knowledge	61.67	34	58.87	63.64	44	33
Tolerance	60.87	35	60.87	60.87	35	38
Planning ability	60.76	36	60.00	61.31	37	36
Critical ability	60.67	37	54.03	65.34	52	27
Independent judgement	60.42	38	59.17	61.31	39	36
Leadership potential	60.07	39	59.17	60.71	39	39
Imagination	60.07	40	61.67	58.93	33	42
Time management	59.38	41	59.17	59.52	39	40
Tact	59.03	42	59.17	58.93	39	42
Organisational skills	59.03	43	59.17	58.93	39	42
Creativity	57.39	44	61.21	54.76	34	49
Knowledge of social/political issues	57.33	45	54.84	59.09	50	41
Communication skills (written)	56.60	46	55.83	57.14	47	46
Ability to relate to wider context	56.58	47	53.91	58.52	53	45
Can summarise key issues	56.52	48	58.70	54.35	45	51
Innovation	56.34	49	60.00	53.66	37	53
Influencing skills	56.11	50	55.68	56.52	48	47
Specialist factual knowledge	55.00	51	58.59	52.33	46	57
Leadership ability	54.17	52	55.00	53.57	49	53
Problem setting ability	53.87	53	53.33	54.27	54	52
Experience of the world of work	53.47	54	54.31	52.91	51	56
Decision making skills	53.13	55	50.83	54.76	56	49
Deep understanding	53.04	56	50.00	55.23	57	48
Relevant work experience	51.41	57	50.86	51.79	55	58
Commercial awareness	50.70	58	47.41	52.98	61	55
Financial knowledge or understanding	50.00	59	50.00	50.00	57	59
Negotiation skills	47.92	60	47.50	48.21	60	60
Knowledge of the organisation	47.57	61	48.28	47.09	59	61
Prior knowledge of the job	46.13	62	45.69	46.43	62	62

SFK = specialist factual knowledge.
Items in italics have significantly different satisfaction scores (at p=0.05) for SFK groups.